

The Tale of Yangban

Translation by Kwon Byungchul

A brief introduction to the writer of *The Tale of Yangban*, Park Jiwon.

Park Jiwon (1737–1805) was a pragmatist, a scholar, and a writer of the late *Joseon* Kingdom. He was born in *Bansongbang Yadong*, the western district of Seoul in 1737. His family was originally from *Bannam*, and his literary name is *Yeonam*. He was a leader of Practical Studies(*Silhak*) along with other distinguished scholars such as Hong Daeyong and Park Jaega. These leading scholars contended that their government should adopt the advanced and practical technology and institutions from Qing China. They also put an emphasis on the importance of manufacturing business and trade.

Yeonam wrote ten short novels in the literary Chinese, the language of the scholars. These novels are considered as the epitome of his literary innovations. With his unique rhetorical devices such as allegory, irony, and satire, he mocked the impractical *Yangban* scholars and lambasted the conservative elite. “In 1780, Park Jiwon accompanied his cousin Park Myeongwon on a diplomatic mission to Beijing, during which he observed up close the cultural and intellectual environment of China at the height of the Qianlong reign. The members of the mission attended the seventieth birthday of the Qianlong Emperor and saw the full glory of the Qing dynasty. China seemed to be at the height of its material power at that moment. Nevertheless, signs of institutional sclerosis and technological decline were also visible to a careful observer like Park. Park expanded the jottings from this trip into a rambling narrative entitled “Diary from a Journey to the Imperial Summer Palace at Rehe.” The vivid descriptions of China, objective evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Manchu rule, and harsh criticism of Korean conservatism he published in this

diary had considerable impact in Korean intellectual circles.”¹ *The Tale of Yangban* finds its origins in that collection.

Park Jiwon established his unique literary theory, which is epitomized in this famous aphorism “Respect the tradition and create the unprecedented in a new perspective”, which means a simultaneous preservation of tradition and breaking away from tradition to search for the path-breaking values. He severely criticized the literary milieu of his times that was rife with indiscriminate and anachronistic mimesis. Instead, he stressed the realistic and vivid depiction of the reality of *Joseon* society. In this sense, he is considered as a harbinger of the Korean literary modernism and realism.

¹ Quoted in Emanuel Pastreich, *The Novels of Park Jiwon*, Seoul, Seoul National University Press, 2011, p. 13.

Historical Background of *The Tale of Yangban*

The Tale of Yangban, a magnum opus of the short stories of Park Jiwon, is closely related with the collapse of the established social class distinctions in the late *Joseon* Kingdom. With the introduction of new agricultural technology such as the transplantation of rice and planting seeds in a furrow, agricultural production doubled. Along with this, the development of commerce and industry gave birth to a new social class like the capitalist farmers and the merchants. Their accumulation of capital allowed them to aspire to move to a higher social class. “What was developing, in western terms, was a laissez-faire capitalist economy, and what happened in the early stages of its development was a familiar phenomenon to economic historians: the rich got richer and the poor got poorer; thus, the traditional class structure of society was disrupted and confused.

Faced with financial distress in the aftermath of the Japanese invasions during *Imjin-waelan*(1592-1598) and the second Manchu invasion, *Byeongjaholan*(1636-1637), the government reluctantly began to offer promotion in social status and even government office to anyone who would supply it with funds or grain. In short, wealth was becoming the sole criterion of status and the traditional constitution of society was breaking down. One symptom was that in Seoul the distinctive hat and clothing of the *yangban* were now worn by anyone who could afford them, and many persons produced false pedigrees showing *yangban* status.”²

Among the collapsed *yangban*, a new intellectual group grew out of strong resolution to innovate the corrupted reality. These scholars were the adherents of Practical Studies(*Silhak*). Central figures of the Practical Studies movement were Jeong Yagyong, Park Jiwon, and Park Jaeja, among others. They severely criticized the impractical government that was permeated with vain discussions

² Han Woo-keun, *The History of Korea*, Seoul, The Eul-Yoo Publishing Company, 1970, pp. 312-313

and factional struggles, utterly disregarding the devastating poverty of the people caused by the invasions. Leaders of *Silhak* stressed the visible improvement of the people's wellness under the ideology of *Silsagusi* which was an academic approach to investigate the truth based on the objective and scientific facts with thorough observation and research. *The Tale of Yangban* reflects aforementioned whirling historical and social change of late *Joseon* kingdom, and it is a brilliant work of satire on the vanity and corruption of the *yangban* class.

Prologue to *The Tale of Yangban* by Park Jiwon

Scholar class has an inherited dignity.

What is the great will of the scholar?

Distance oneself from the lust for power and interest,

Adhere to his real self regardless of prosperity.

Although in dire poverty, he never forgets his real self and duty as a scholar.

Without devoting himself to honor and integrity,

Only selling his ancestors' merits and virtue

leaning against the majesty of his family.

Then, what is the difference between the merchant and the scholar?

Thus, I write *The Tale of Yangban*.

*Yangban*³ is an honorific term referring to the members of the scholastic class. There once lived a *yangban*, who was benevolent and enjoyed reading in *Jeongsun* county(*Kun*)⁴. Every time a newly appointed district magistrate⁵ arrived in *Jeongsun* county, he thought it proper etiquette to visit this *yangban* in person and pay homage to him.

The *yangban* was so poor that he only managed to survive by relying on a government rice loan⁶ every year. Year after year, his debt grew until it reached one thousand straw bags of rice. When the provincial governor inspected the balance sheet of the government rice loan in each county, he identified the drastic reduction of rice in *Jeongsun* as being caused by the *yangban*. The infuriated governor ordered the *yangban* to be imprisoned, saying, “Who on earth caused a decrease in our military provisions?”

The district magistrate felt pity that this poverty stricken *yangban* had no other way to pay back his debt. So he could not put the *yangban* in jail. The district magistrate himself was in a dilemma seeing that there were no alternatives at all.

³ “As the Bone Rank structure of the *Silla* aristocracy disappeared by the time the *Koryo* dynasty was founded, a new upper class took its place. It was mainly composed of the expanding royal clan, families which had been raised to affluence for their help in founding the new dynasty, and the powerful local magnates who had appeared toward the close of the *Silla* dynasty. This class was designated individually and collectively by the Korean term *yangban*, meaning civil and military officials. Civil officials were called *munban* and military officials *muban*, the ending *-ban* signifying “class.” *Yangban* simply means “both classes.”. Quoted with some necessary modification in Han Woo-Keun, *The History of Korea*, Seoul, The Eul-Yoo Publishing Company, 1970.

⁴ “In *Joseon* dynasty, the country was divided into county(*Kun*), each *Kun* containing a number of *myen* or cantons, each of which includes a number of *ni* or villages.” Quoted with some necessary modification in Isabella Lucy Bird, *KOREA And Her Neighbors*, New York, Adamant Media Corporation, 2005.

⁵ “In the period of *Joseon* dynasty, each province had a governor who combined the duties of administrator, censor, and military leader. Under him were the district magistrates, who had similar multiple functions.”, Quoted with some necessary modification in Han Woo-Keun, *The History of Korea*, Seoul, The Eul-Yoo Publishing Company, 1970.

⁶ “Rice-loan system of *Joseon* dynasty was originally devised in order to support the farmers through difficult periods with interest-free loans. To this day in Korea the seasons of late spring and summer are known as the “barley pass,” because during those months the farmers, with the previous year’s rice all consumed or paid out in taxes, had to depend upon the spring barley crop until the new rice was harvested in the fall.” Quoted with some necessary modification in Han Woo-Keun, *The History of Korea*, Seoul, The Eul-Yoo Publishing Company, 1970.

This helpless *yangban* was at a loss for what to do and only cried all day and night. His wife threw bitter words at him saying “How poor you are! For all your life, you have just enjoyed reading, but now you can’t even find a way to pay for the government rice loans. Oh, my! The poor little *yangban*! *Yangban*, that’s not worth a penny.”

At that time, a rich but low-status man consulted with his family members about this *yangban* in despair. He commented how people always show respect for the *yangban* even though he is poor, whereas people always have contempt for us regardless of our wealth. We can’t even think of mounting a horse. Whenever we encounter a *yanban*, we become daunted and can hardly breathe. We are supposed to kowtow at the yard and keep our nose to the ground and crawl on our knees. We are always treated poorly like this. Where can we find something more insulting than this?

Now, this destitute *yangban* has gotten into trouble because he was not able to repay his debt and certainly it will be difficult for him to keep up his *yangban* status. Why don’t we purchase the title from him?”⁷ Then the man visited the *yangban* and said, “Let us pay for your debt.” The *yangban* delightedly accepted his offer, so the ordinary rich man paid off the government rice loan that the *yangban* owed.

The district magistrate of the county was stunned at the news, and he visited the *yangban* to comfort him and hear the story of how he paid off his government loan as well. The *yangban* was wearing a felt hat and shorts and presented a deep bow to him. Kneeling down on the road and calling himself a lowly man, the *yangban* dared not raise his eyes to see the district magistrate. Surprised at this sight, the district magistrate ran over and lifted up the *yangban*, asking, “Why on earth do you debase yourself and do such a foolish

⁷ *Yangban* was not an impenetrable class. By the time of late *Joseon*, money could buy the status of *Yangban* through a variety of official and unauthorized channels such as an honorary *Yangban* certification from the government with the donation of money and grain, paying bribes to a government official, or purchasing a highborn pedigree to enjoy the coveted privileges of *Yangban*. It was a transaction between desperate *Yangbans* and rich commoners.

thing?” But the *yangban* was even more scared at this and lay flat on the ground with his forehead hitting the ground saying, “Too much appreciated sir. It is not that I debased myself but that I already sold the title *yangban* on condition that the rich man would pay for my loan. So, it is the rich man of this town who is the *yangban* now. How dare I raise myself using the former title and pretend I am still a *yangban*!.”

After hearing this, the district magistrate was deeply impressed and said, “Oh, the rich man! What a gentle man he is!” The rich man is a true gentleman and a man of virtue. He is rich, but he is not stingy at all, so he can be called a man of justice. He saved other people from their difficulties as if they were his own problems, so he is benevolent. It is wise of him to distance himself from the vulgar and follow the moral. This rich man is good enough to be titled a genuine *yangban*.”

However, the transaction between these individuals happened in private. Without some official identification, this may trigger legal proceedings in the future, so I contend that we gather the residents as observers and file an official document about the deal on which I will write my own signature.”

On returning to his office, the district magistrate ordered all scholars, farmers, technicians, and business people in town to gather around the court yard. Then he let the rich man sit on the right side of the Chairman of the Village Council and had the *yangban* stand down to the chief administrative staff and then issued an official certification of the agreement as follows.

“Somewhere in September, the tenth of *Geonlyung*(1745, the 21st reign of King *Yongjo*(1724-1776)), we wrote this document in which the title of *yangban* was sold to pay the debt of a thousand straw bags of government rice loan.

Speaking of *yangban*, there are several types. Those who just read books are called scholars and those who became politicians

we call senior officials, and we call a worthy *yangban* a true gentleman. Military officials line up to the west row of the King's throne. Civil officials line up to the east row of the king's throne. This is the very '*yangban*'.⁸ Choose one of these two divisions as you wish and hence as a *yangban* you must quit any malicious demeanor and admire people of the past and be noble minded. Always get up around 4 in the morning and light the oil lamp and position yourself on your heels with your eyes pointing to the end of your nose. *Yangban* has to recite *Dong lae bag-ur*⁹ just like a curling stone sliding on ice.

When hungry, *yangban* must tolerate it and when it's cold you endure it, and *yangban* should not ever utter a word about his poverty. Knocking on the teeth and softly beating the back of the head with fingers and keep the saliva in the mouth for a while and after some soft rinses, swallow it. You must dust off your coat hood with the coat sleeve and restore the fur. Never wash the face in a rough and reckless manner. Brush your teeth carefully to prevent bad breath. You must call a servant with prolonged and grand voice and walk with dragging steps.

Transcribe classical texts like *Go mun jinbo*¹⁰ and *Dang si pum hui*¹¹ in such tiny characters as grains of sesame. Therefore, one hundred characters only occupy one line. You must never touch money with your hands and don't ask about the price of rice. However hot it may be, you must never take off your socks and when at the table you should be in full dress, not with a bare head.

⁸ Literally, *yangban* means 'dual divisions' or 'classes', viz. the west and the east or the civil officials and the military officials.

⁹ This classical text was written by *Yeojoogyeom* of South *Song* Dynasty, China, in 1168. It was regarded as the canon in preparing for the civil service examination and carefully read among the scholars and candidates of the civil examination of the *Joseon* dynasty.

¹⁰ This book is a collection of poems descending from *Seonjin* to *Song* Period, China. The author is unknown.

¹¹ This book is a collection of poems of *Dang* Period, China, which was compiled by *Gobyeong* of *Myeong* Dynasty, China.

When you eat, never try to have the broth¹² first, and when you drink water, never make a gulping sound. You must never hit chopsticks on the table. Never eat raw leek. When you drink *makgeolli*¹³, don't wet the beard, and when you smoke don't take deep breathes that deform the cheeks.

Even when annoyed, you must never abuse your wife. Never step on the bowls or slap kids regardless of how infuriated you are. You never scold a servant harshly by saying "Go to hell!". When criticizing an ox or horse, you never indiscriminately blame the owner of it. When sick, don't even try to send for an exorcist. Never have a monk preside over the memorial service for your ancestors. Never warm your hands over a brazier. While speaking, you never sputter. Don't slaughter cows. The *yangban* never gambles.

Once you break any one of the above mentioned *yangban*'s codes of conduct, a court will rectify this certificate at a government district office.

After writing all this on the certificate, the district magistrate of *Jeongsun* county as head of the district office wrote his name and the chairman and vice chairman of the Village Council also signed as attestors. As the errand clerk stamped the document, it sounded like the beating of the drum for ushering the king and the shape looked like twinkling stars spreading across the sheet. As the chief of adjunct staff read out the document, the rich man was dumb struck for a while before finally opening his mouth and saying, "Is that all for *yangban*? *Yangban* is on a par with immortal gods just as I have heard it. If that is so, I feel myself utterly usurped. So I beseech you to revise the document, so it can

¹² Broth as a thin and watery soup accompanies every meals of the traditional Korean cuisine.

¹³ 'The fermented liquors of Korea vary from a smooth white drink resembling buttermilk in appearance, and very mild, to a water-white spirit of strong smell and fiery taste. Between these comes the ordinary rice wine, slightly yellowish, akin to Japanese *sake* and Chinese *samshu*, with a faint, sickly smell and flavor. They all taste more or less strongly of smoke, oil, and alcohol, and the fusel oil remains even in the best. They are manufactured from rice, millet, and barely.' wrote Isabella Lucy Bird in her book, *KOREA And Her Neighbors*. pp. 91-92.

be beneficial to me”. Therefore, the document was revised like this.

“When heaven created people, there were four types of people. Among those people, the noblest one is the scholar. We call him ‘*yangban*’, and he has huge merits. He can live without farming or selling. With crude study of literature and history, he can pass the higher civil examination¹⁴ or attain the position of *Jinsa*¹⁵ at least.

The certificate of passing the civil service exam is the size of two *Chas*¹⁶ at most but everything is furnished just like a sack of fortune. Even though a *Jinsa* entered his first government post when he was thirty, he can make himself known and rise to a higher position thanks to his ancestors’ merits and virtue. His eardrums turned white under a sunshade, and his belly bulged by the bell rope. Ear rings missed in his room are from the coquettish *gisaeng*¹⁷, and scattered grains in the courtyard are for the cranes.

Although living in countryside as a negligible scholar, *yangban* acts high handedly. He gets the ox next door to plough his field and deploys people in the village to weed his field. Who dares to stand against him? He drips lye into your nose, ties up the topknot and shakes, and pulls off the long sideburns. Who dares to

¹⁴ The higher civil examination of the *Joseon* dynasty qualified the successful candidates to serve in all important governmental offices; the success in the examination was by far the most coveted honor. In theory, the civil service examination was not a monopoly of *Yangban*, even though it was closed to artisans, merchants, *Mu-tang*, sorcerers, buddhist monks, servants, offsprings of *Yangban* and his concubine. In reality, then, the examination tended to be exclusive to the privileged class, *Yangban*.

¹⁵ A degree given to a candidate of civil examination who successfully passed the tests from both provinces and Seoul.

¹⁶ Traditional measuring unit of Korean foot(=30.3 cm).

¹⁷ A Korean geisha, if it may be called so. *Gisaeng* is well described by Isabella Lucy Bird in *KOREA And Her Neighbors* (Adamant Media Corporation, 2005:352): ‘... The *gesang* are trained from a very early age in such accomplishments as other Korean women lack, and which will ensure their attractiveness, such as playing on various musical instruments, singing, dancing, reading, reciting, writing, and fancy work. As their destiny is to make time pass agreeably for men of the upper classes, this amount of education is essential... Their dancing, like that of most Oriental countries, consists chiefly of posturing, and is said by those foreigners who have seen it, to be perfectly free from impropriety.’

question and accuse him?”

The rich man listens to this and then is astonished, saying, “Stop it! Stop it!, What nonsense is this? Are you trying to push me to become a thief?.” Shaking his head and stepping away, he never mentioned the affairs of *yangban* for the rest of his life.